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TENS OF THOUSANDS OF YOUNG ADULTS IN HAMBURG

## The Face of the Church as Communion

"Whoever looks to God will shine; their faces will not be downcast," sings the psalmist. In Hamburg, in trust and simplicity, one could see a light shining on the face of the Church. That light revealed its true face, its face of communion.

In Hamburg as in many other places, the Church is sometimes viewed as an out-of-date institution, with no appreciation of the beauty of today's world, a vestige of the past that is afraid to accept present-day society. And yet it bears within it a Gospel reality, sometimes concealed, but still intact in its pristine freshness. It takes very little for this reality to become visible. And so, from time to time an unexpected event, like the arrival in Hamburg of thousands of young adults from across the European continent, can provide the "very little" necessary. A "very little" that gave many Christians and

non-Christians of the city the opportunity to give the best of themselves.

### A simple sign

The meeting in Hamburg did not claim to be anything but a simple sign. You could read this in the booklet prepared last autumn to explain the meaning of the meeting to the residents of Hamburg: "The European meeting is not a conference on a precise topic. The participants do not share a specific political outlook, nor do they constitute a movement. They come from different

churches and different Christian traditions. They cut across human and geographical boundaries. They come not to focus on what divides them, but on what unites them, not to reinforce their pessimism, but to glimpse signs of hope."

The meeting took place at a trying time for the Christians of Hamburg. The financial situation of the Lutheran and Catholic churches is more and more difficult. They have to make painful decisions: closing churches, shutting down some agencies that began their work many years ago with great generosity and can no longer continue





in the same style. And that causes tensions. "This is no time to hold a youth meeting," said many people. But others asserted, "We need something different just now."

The meeting did not provide any solutions to the problems of the Church, nor did it offer a brand-new proposal to enable Christian communities to find a way to grow. It was essentially a celebration of what already exists, and also of what is hoped for. The meeting wanted to foster a rediscovery of what already unites us as Christians from different backgrounds, well beyond the painful legacies of history. It tried to express the desire to let go of what has wounded us in order to pray together, as a dozen Church leaders—Lutheran, Orthodox and Catholic bishops—did the evening of December 30th when they knelt together around the icon of Christ on the cross.

### "We are not alone"

Many different Christian denominations are present in Hamburg. Close to 280 parishes and congregations of these confessions welcomed the young participants, both in the city itself and in its surroundings. A good welcome was ex-

tended in neighboring cities as well, as far as Lübeck or Lüneburg, more than sixty kilometers from Hamburg.

Six Protestant and Catholic bishops of the greater Hamburg region had written a joint letter to all the parishes to encourage them to open their doors to the tens of thousands of young adults who were coming from throughout Eastern and Western Europe, and even beyond: "They will give a sign of hope and encouragement in a world where many are searching for meaning and support. Let us offer them a warm welcome!"

The common prayers took place in large halls decorated by reproductions of local painters, such as the altars of Meister Bertram, or by large crosses symbolizing the tree of life, like the one in the nearby cathedral of Lübeck. A young woman from the South of Germany described her experience marked by these prayers:

"As soon as I entered Hall 4 the first evening, I felt the togetherness. As soon as you begin to sing and pray together, all your burdens become lighter and a great peace arrives, with joy. It helps to see that we are not alone in our faith, that others are there, too. In these prayers, I felt that God was so near. And that joy was infectious. It was impressive to see the attitude of people in the street or in the underground change, and to discover their attention and their interest. Our host family overwhelmed us by their hospitality. We had no language problems; they tried to understand what we were looking for, and I was so happy when our 'host mum' came with us to the evening prayer in the halls. It was beautiful to see all the generations mingling and older people

letting themselves be touched by the prayer."

The Lutheran bishop Huber, president of the Evangelical Council of Churches in Germany, wrote to Brother Roger, "This meeting in Hamburg is an immense sign of peace and openness to reconciliation. It is striking to see so many young adults from throughout Europe and from other parts of the world take part in the 'pilgrimage of trust on earth.' This 'pilgrimage' has already influenced many generations of young people and given them the courage of faith to make the commitments that our day calls for. Your own commitment, dear Brother Roger, is a decisive catalyst in this regard. Through you and your brothers the young people grasp that they are not alone in their efforts for reconciliation in our world, but on the contrary that they are linked together in a worldwide prayer community."

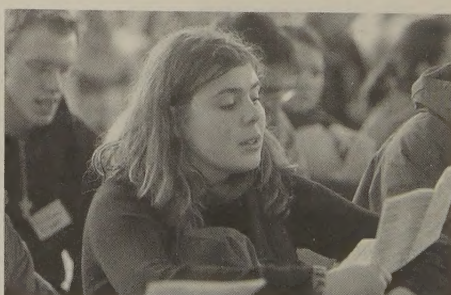
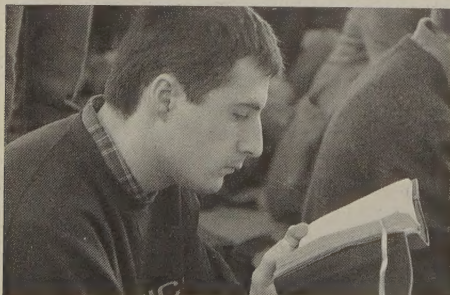
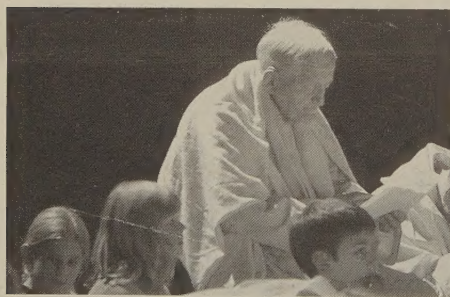
A meeting like this cannot take place without the support not only of the local churches, but also of all the different administrations and services of the host towns. Organizing the transportation, for example, requires that many people give up their holidays to ensure additional services. Or the welcome in the schools: the custodians agreed to come to work and did it with great good will.

### "In your home I discovered God"

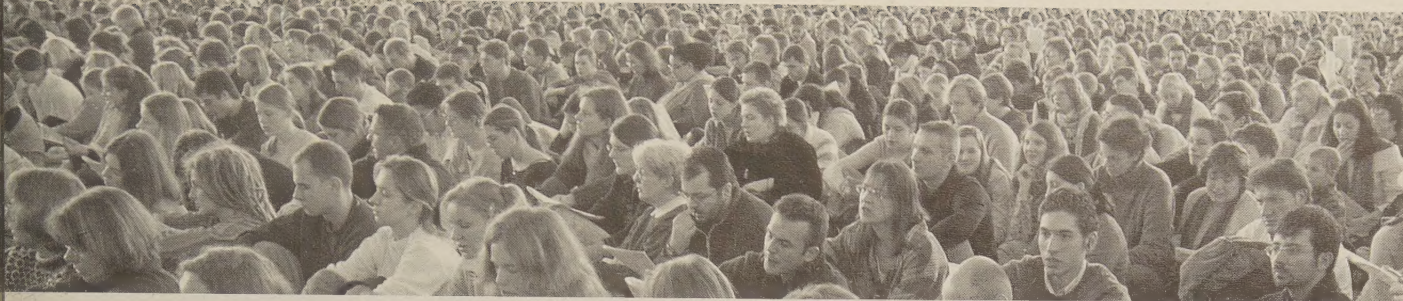
One of those who was in charge of the preparation in the host parishes gives several examples based on what he heard in a small parish far from Hamburg. It welcomed 250 young people, all in families:

"The meeting touched many different people, some of whom were already church members, others who were rather far off.

"In that district, there was a joint preparation between the Catholic and the Lutheran parishes. All the meetings of the two preparation groups were held together. The priest and the pastor were not very visible during the preparation. But, after the meeting, I saw the priest in tears explaining how beautiful







the Eucharist on January 1st was for him. Beforehand he was afraid and was wondering, 'What shall we do if the church is too small and there is no room?' But afterwards he told me that he had celebrated 'the most beautiful Mass' in his twenty years as a priest.

"A young couple who no longer goes to church—or who perhaps never did—welcomed seven participants, five Russians and two Poles. One of the Polish boys wrote them an email afterwards: 'In your home I discovered God.' After the meeting the young woman said, 'I welcomed them even though I don't believe in God.' She paused a moment and added, 'At least up till now I thought I didn't believe in God...'

"The prayers in the parishes and the celebration on January 1st encouraged people to reflect and to look for how to prepare beautiful celebrations in the future. They began to think about ways to make the liturgy more meaningful. This also led them to ask the question of how to support the priests and pastors in their ministry."

After the meeting, each parish was invited to meet for a follow-up gathering to share their experiences. At Börnsen, for example, after everyone told their story, the question arose: how to continue after the meeting? Many had discovered that a Bible text and a few questions were enough to foster a good discussion. They realized that such sharing did not require a long preparation; very different people could come together in a simple manner and have a profound dialogue. So they decided to meet once a month for a meal together followed by a time of sharing on a Bible passage. The evenings will end with a simple time of prayer together. The idea they had is to have this meeting in the parish house in this recently built district and to invite young families who have just arrived in the area.

## "Christ existing as the Church"

The face of the Church that shone out was that of communion. A German theologian, imprisoned and executed

during the Second World War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, spoke of "Christ existing as the Church." When he was 21, he wrote that "in Christ humankind is really drawn into communion with God" (*Sanctorum communio*, Berlin 1930). In this spirit, how can we show that the Church does not exist for itself but for the world, to make the face of every human being shine out?

The meeting tried to multiply opportunities to extend fellowship as far as possible. On several occasions visits were made to prisoners in the prison located near the exhibition centre where the prayers were held. Two other visits took place during the months of preparation to a prison for minors on an island in the Elbe River. Several of the afternoon workshops witnessed to this presence of the Church rooted in the burning questions of German society: "Simple actions to give dignity: a life devoted to the homeless in the port district St-Pauli." "At the central station, different paths in life cross: discover the 'railway station mission'." "Rediscover a taste for life: the 'Jesus Centre' and the 'Teestube Sarah', two centres of hospitality in the port district St. Pauli." "When the Gospel transforms a passage in the underground: a Christian presence in the 'Rathauspassage'."

On January 1st, during the last prayer service, to conclude the meeting Brother Roger described several features of the face of the Church as communion:

"When we live in communion with God, we desire as well to live in communion with others. The Gospel invites us to love and to say it by the way we live. It is our life that can make faith, trust in God, credible for those around

us. Today more than ever, are not Christians called to be an irreplaceable leaven of communion in the places where they live? How then can Christians still remain divided? Communion is the touchstone. It is born in the heart of hearts of a Christian, in forgiveness and in love. For twenty-six years now, we have been undertaking a 'pilgrimage of trust on earth' with the young. At the end of this meeting in Hamburg, which was a stage in this 'pilgrimage of trust on earth,' we would like to remember that communion is a life, not a theory. To love and say it with our lives, yes, to love in goodness of heart and to forgive: there we find one of the wellsprings of joy."





Why does Jesus call the commandment to love one another a "new" commandment?

Jesus spoke of a "new" commandment only once. On the eve of his passion, he said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). In what way is this commandment new? Is not mutual love required by the previous commandment: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18)?

Jesus offers a new measure for love. He says "just as I have loved you" at the very moment when, for love, he gives everything. "Before the Passover celebration, Jesus (...), having loved his own who were in the world, showed them the full extent of his love" (John 13:1). He begins by washing their feet while saying, "I have given you an example" (verse 15). Then, deeply troubled by the fact that one of the Twelve, the apostle Judas, is going to betray him, he still keeps on loving him, expressing that love by handing him a piece of bread: "He took it and gave it to Judas" (verse 26). And finally, the gift of an example and the gift of a piece of bread culminate in the gift of the commandment: "I give you a new commandment."

Just before the new commandment there are some enigmatic words: "Now the Son of man has been glorified" (verse 31). How is Christ glorified before he enters into the glory of his Father by his cross and resurrection? He is already glorified, because his glory is to love. That is why his glory is manifested now, when he "shows the full extent of his love." Judas "went out into the night" to hand him over. But Jesus does not submit passively to the event: while being handed over, he gives himself, continuing to love in a situation that seems hopeless. That is his glory.

With the new commandment, Jesus makes his disciples a part of his own way of life; he enables them to love as he loves. That evening he prayed, "May the love with which you loved me be in them and I in them" (John 17:26). Henceforth he will dwell within them as love; he will love in them. With this gift of the new commandment, Jesus bestows his presence. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Judas' exit is immediately followed by the institution of the Eucharist; in John's Gospel, by the gift of the new commandment. Like the Eucharist, the new commandment is a real presence.

That night Jesus "took the cup and said: this cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Corinthians 11:25). His commandment is new because it belongs to the new covenant, announced by the prophet Jeremiah: "I will make a new covenant (...); I will place my Law deep within them and write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:31-34). In the new covenant, the former commandment is given in a new way. God's Law is no longer engraved on tablets of stone, but written in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who unites our will to the will of God.

What is the importance of the commandments in our relationship with God?

According to the apostle John, communion with God is expressed by observing the commandments. "Whoever keeps his commandments remains in God and God in them" (1 John 3:24). On Sinai, God made a covenant with "those who love him and keep his commandments" (Deuteronomy 7:9). As we go back still further towards the beginning, the Bible tells us that when he created human beings, God gave them a commandment straightaway (Genesis 2:16-17). It is as if, without a commandment, there is no relationship with God.

This ubiquitousness of the commandments can seem burdensome. But, though it may appear paradoxical at first glance, God's commandments affirm our freedom. Through the commandments, God speaks to us. What we call the "ten commandments" are referred to as the "ten words" in the Bible (e.g. Exodus 34:28). Through the commandments, God speaks to us and invites us to choose (Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

God enables the animals to do instinctively what is right. To human beings, he gives the commandments, running the risk of our freedom. "The turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord" (Jeremiah 8:7). God does not program human beings nor force them to behave in a certain way. God speaks to us. Jeremiah complains about the situation that this can create. But if God does not want to guide us except by speaking to us by his commandments, that is because our free response—whatever it may be—matters more to him than correct behaviour.

One day, a young man said to Jesus, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:16-17). Why does Jesus oppose, in his reply, simply keeping the commandments and asking questions about what it is good to do? Commandments are different from information about what is good or evil. Jesus recalls that "only One is good." Through the commandments, God does not so much communicate knowledge about good and evil as call us to listen and to put into practice what we hear.

Jesus' reaction makes us think of the first commandment God gave in the Garden of Eden which forbids to "eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:17). This is a curious commandment that calls us, at least to begin with, to give up trying to know good and evil! The commandment asks us to leave this knowledge to God. At the center of human existence it conserves a zone of unknowing, a space free for trusting, for listening to God. The commandments bring to life our relationship to God when we discern in them an echo of the commandment given in paradise, the voice of God that tells us: "Let me be your God; let me show you the way; trust in me!"



God of peace, you seek to place a Gospel joy within us. That joy is there, close at hand, reawakened by the look of trust with which you regard our lives.

**2 SUN** Jesus said: My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I and the Father are one.

**3 Mon** Jesus said: The words I say to you are not just my own, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.

**4 Tue** Paul writes: All things are yours; but you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

**5 Wed** Jesus said to his disciples: You know that in the world rulers lord it over their subjects and make their power felt. This is not to happen among you. No, anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant.

**6 Thu** Jesus said: Not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father knowing. And even the very hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid.

**7 Fri** With all humility, gentleness and patience, bear with one another in love. Take every care to maintain the unity of the Spirit by the bond of peace.

**8 Sat** Paul writes: I am confident that the One who began a good work in you will go on completing it until the day of Christ Jesus comes.

**1 Sat** See that people do not pay back evil for evil, but always seek what is good, both among yourselves and for others.

These short readings are those read, day by day, at community prayer in Taizé. The Bible reference given indicates a slightly longer passage.

**9 SUN** Jesus said: Love one another just as I have loved you. By this, everyone will recognize you as my disciples.

**10 Mon** You will seek the Lord your God; you will find the Lord if you search for him with all your heart and all your soul.

**11 Tue** Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who are rejoicing, weep with those who weep.

**12 Wed** Jesus said: I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for having revealed to little children what you have hidden from the learned and clever.

**13 Thu** Paul writes: Judge nothing prematurely, but wait until the Lord comes.

**14 Fri** The Lord says to his people: Do not mistreat or oppress the strangers in your midst, for you too were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

**15 Sat** Paul writes: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the communion in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

**16 SUN** Jesus said: Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and the Father will love them, and we shall come to them and make our home in them.

**17 Mon** The Lord your God walks with you. God will never leave you or forsake you.

**18 Tue** St. Paul writes: I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

**19 Wed** God wanted all his fullness to dwell in Christ, and through him to reconcile all things to himself.

**20 Thu** ASCENSION After Jesus' Ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem full of joy, and they were continually in the Temple praising God.

**21 Fri** Let no one seek their own interest, but rather the good of others. Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

**22 Sat** You have delivered my soul from death, Lord, so that I may walk in the presence of God in the light of life.

**23 SUN** Jesus prayed for his disciples, saying: Father, may they all be one, just as you are in me and I am in you, so that they may also be in us and the world may believe that you sent me.

**24 Mon** Fathom me, God, and know my heart. Test me, know my thoughts and guide me in the way that is everlasting.

**25 Tue** Jesus said: No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.

**26 Wed** You are part of God's household. You are built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone.

**27 Thu** Jesus said: Do to others as you would like them to do to you.

**28 Fri** You who revere the Lord, wait for his mercy. Do not turn aside from him.

**29 Sat** Jesus said to his disciples: You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, what can make it salty again?

**30 SUN** PENTECOST The Risen Christ said to the disciples: "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

**31 Mon** Mary said: The Lord has come to the help of his servant, being mindful of his faithful love as he promised to our forefathers.

MAY

MEDITATING ON THE WORD



**6 SUN** Jn 16:12-15 Jesus said: When the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking of his own accord but will say only what he has been told.

**7 Mon** Mt 11:25-30 Jesus said: Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

**8 Tue** Ps 69:30-37 You who seek God, may your hearts live! For God listens to the poor.

**9 Wed** 1 Jn 4:7-12 God's love for us has been shown in this way: God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him.

**10 Thu** Jn 6:28-35 Jesus said: I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

**11 Fri** Dt 4:29-31 The Lord your God is a merciful God who will not forsake you.

**12 Sat** Mt 14:13-21 Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, Jesus gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, who gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied.

**1 Tue** 1 Co 12:4-11 In each person the Holy Spirit manifests his action for the good of all.

**2 Wed** Jn 14:21-28 Jesus said: The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you.

**3 Thu** Ac 4:32-34 All the first Christians were one in heart and mind. No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but they shared everything they had.

**4 Fri** Ep 5:14-20 Let yourselves be filled by the Spirit. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.

**5 Sat** Mt 7:7-8 I watch in hope for God who will save me. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord is my light.

**13 SUN** 1 Co 11:23-26 Paul writes: I received from the Lord what I passed on to you. Whenever you eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord, you are proclaiming his death until he comes.

**14 Mon** Ps 9 Those who know your name trust in you, Lord. For you never forsake those who seek you.

**15 Tue** Ps 42 In the day, God sends his faithful love, and even at night the song it inspires in me is a prayer to the God of my life.

**16 Wed** 1 Co 1:26-31 God chose things that by human standards are weak to confound the strong, God chose what is lowly and despised in the eyes of the world.

**17 Thu** Rm 11:29,33-36 Paul writes: God never revokes his gifts or his call.

**18 Fri** Mt 5:44-48 Jesus said: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. You must set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his.

**19 Sat** 1 Th 3:12-13 May God make your love increase so that it overflows for each other and for everyone. May God confirm your hearts.

**20 SUN** Lk 9:18-24 Jesus said: Whoever wants to be a follower of mine must renounce themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

**21 Mon** Ps 138 Lord, you look upon the humble. Though I live surrounded by trouble, you give me life.

**22 Tue** Ezk 11:17-20 The Lord says: I will give an undivided heart to my people. I will put a new spirit in them.

**23 Wed** 1 Th 5:12-22 Be always joyful, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances.

**24 Thu** Ac 13:23-25 St JOHN THE BAPTIST As John was completing his work, he said: Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but one is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

**25 Fri** 1 P 3:8-12 Do not repay one wrong with another. Seek peace and pursue it.

**26 Sat** 2 Th 1:11-12 May God fulfill every good purpose of yours by his power and complete all that you have been doing by faith.

**27 SUN** Lk 9:57-62 Someone said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus answered, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

**28 Mon** Ep 1:15-23 May God enlighten the eyes of your hearts so that you may see the hope to which he calls you.

**29 Tue** Mt 16:13-20 SS PETER AND PAUL Peter said to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by any human, but by my Father in heaven."

**30 Wed** Is 50:10 Who among you reveres the Lord? Who among you walks in darkness and sees no light? Trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon your God.

Jesus our hope, by your Gospel we realize that, even in the hours of darkness, God wants happiness for us. And the peace in our hearts can make life beautiful for those around us.

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# MEDITATING ON THE WORD

# JUNE



The passage tells us that the two brothers bring to God their offering, the fruit of their labour, and that God "had regard for Abel and his offering but did not have regard for Cain and his offering." We could ask why. For what reason does God not look at these two brothers in the same way? Why does God not accept Cain's offering? The text gives no answer to this question. As in so many situations, we are invited to deal with a fact that has taken place without knowing the causes that led to it.

We may wonder if it is really true that God does not accept Cain's offering or if it is Cain who, unlike his brother, has the impression that he is not well regarded. Let us admit, however, that God does not have the same attitude with respect to these two brothers. Then questions come up: Are we not all different? Is it worth comparing ourselves to others? Cain certainly had gifts that Abel did not have. "Why are you downcast?" God asks Cain. God looks at him and sees his sadness. God speaks to Cain, which he did not do to Abel. But Cain does not "lift up his head." He refuses to look further forward and instead withdraws into his jealousy. He does not manage to control the violent impulse that wells up in him and he kills his brother.

Cain could not live in peace with his brother nor be glad about the different gifts each person has received. He destroys the harmony that reigned and he cannot live from his labour, as he did previously. Through this attitude he loses a lot. But he does not lose God's love and attention. God "places a mark on him" to protect him. God loves every human being as he or she is, with their defects. And when we lift up our eyes to welcome God's love, we may become more attentive to these questions that arise from the depths of our heart: "Where is your brother? What have you done?"

- How can we leave aside the voices, however legitimate they may be, that can lead to disputes or even to violence?
- What can help me to accept others better, with their differences and in spite of all their weaknesses?

Martha wishes to be hospitable, and so she begins at once to serve her guests so that they lack nothing. Then, seeing that she is overwhelmed by all she wanted to accomplish, she begins to worry and hardens her heart to her sister, who had left her all alone. Jesus tells Martha that she accords too much importance to and worries about things that may not be so essential.

Jesus does not criticize the service Martha wants to offer him. He knows that she is preparing all these things for love. And it is perhaps with deep tenderness that he says to her: "Martha, Martha..." But Jesus does not agree with Martha's criticism of her sister. She too is acting out of love: out of love she dared to go against the customs of the time and sat "at the Lord's feet." Mary "chose the better part," because she chose to welcome what Jesus gives to her. She listens to his Word, which "will not be taken away from her," for every Word that comes from the Lord's mouth does not return to him without having fulfilled its mission (Isaiah 55:11).

Jesus' reaction could seem to be in contradiction with the Gospel passage that precedes the text, the parable of the Good Samaritan. On the one hand, Jesus invites people to act, not to remain indifferent to the needs of others but always to be ready to serve. On the other hand, he praises the attitude of Mary, who does not help her sister and does not serve the guests as tradition required. By approving Mary, Jesus does not want us to remain passive. He says, "Happy those who hear God's word and keep it" (Luke 11:28). He encourages us to find time in our life to stop and welcome his Word, to remain sitting at his feet, in the position of the disciple listening to the Teacher. And this time of listening, silence and prayer leads us to put the Word into practice, to love more deeply, more freely and more generously.

- How do I try to welcome Jesus into my life?
- What habits and customs do I have to go against in order to listen peaceably to the Word?

Johannine hours are meant as a way of seeking God in silence and prayer in the midst of our daily life. During the course of a day, take an hour or so to read the Bible passage with the short commentary and to reflect on the questions which follow. Afterwards, a group of 3 to 10 people can meet to share what they have discovered and perhaps for a time of prayer.

## Senegal

### With Beggar Children

*Taizé brothers have been living in Dakar, Senegal, for over ten years. Here, one of them describes his work among beggar children in one of the poorer parts of the city.*

Around forty boys aged between seven and fifteen are living in a small community house in a working-class district of Dakar. They are in the care of a teacher to whom their parents, poor Muslim village folk, have confided one or two of their children. This is a very common practice in Senegal. The teacher is in charge of the children's entire education: personal, schooling, and above all religious (the study of the Koran). Unfortunately,

because they are extremely poor, during all the years the children are in the care of the teacher, the parents are unable to make any material or financial contribution. So the teacher, who has no other resources to live on either, is obliged to send the children out begging for several hours every day. The Islamic practice of exhorting every believer to give alms to the poor has meant that in Senegal this system of children begging has lasted to the present day.

Meanwhile, with the huge rural exodus and the ever growing poverty in Senegal, the number of beggar children has increased considerably in the cities, especially in the capital, Dakar. Unfortunately, many of these children are exploited by those in whose care they are

and they end up spending more time begging than studying. Some are even severely beaten if they do not bring back enough money at the end of the day. Sometime some of them prefer to run away and end up joining one of the gangs of children living on the streets where violence and drugs have devastating effects. Thankfully, this is not the case with the group of forty children I've been in touch with for nearly two years now. Their teacher is an older man, poor, devout, and very kind hearted. His name is Serigne S. and he is assisted by one of his younger sisters, Awa, who is full of energy and gentleness, and who is always smiling. It is above all thanks to Awa and her friends that we have managed to make a large number of families aware—especially the mothers—of the



## Australia

The keynote to the visit one of the brothers will be making to Australia from 17 March to 4 April is "pilgrimage in daily life". Whether it is a pilgrimage from church to church - Anglican, Coptic, Catholic - in Paramatta, with the NSW Ecumenical Council, with young people and those with families, the visit includes Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide and Melbourne.

<http://www.taize.fr/en/enplgap.htm>

## Visits in Europe

Following the meeting in Hamburg, and during the weeks leading up to Easter, brothers of the community are making visits in many countries of Europe, among them: Albania, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, UK. For details:

<http://www.taize.fr/en/enplgeur.htm>

## Bangladesh

For nearly thirty years, Taizé brothers living in Bangladesh have been attempting to build bridges of trust, through welcoming the very poor, setting up small schools for children, care for the handicapped, meetings for young adults: "For most of the 150 million people of Bangladesh the prospects for tomorrow are not encouraging at all, especially the young."

<http://www.taize.fr/en/enplgba1.htm>

## Chile

One of the young adults who took part describes his experiences at the recent Taizé meeting on the island of Chiloé, off central Chile. "I must admit that at the beginning we had many doubts, and few of us really believed in the event. Now it is hard to find words to describe all that we lived together." During the meeting, a young man was "sent" to take part in the preparation for the meeting in El Alto, Bolivia from 29 April to 3 May.

<http://www.taize.fr/en/enplgamr.htm>

## Easter at Taizé

Program information, accommodation, suggested costs, what to bring: for young adult meetings, bringing a group, adults 30+, parents with children, on-line registration:

<http://www.taize.fr/en/enmtgyth.htm>

difficult situation of these forty children. Little by little, a network of solidarity and friendship has been set up in the neighbourhood.

## Daily meals for forty children

For over a year and a half now, none of the children needs to go begging anymore for their midday and evening meals. Each child now has a "god-mother" (sometimes two) one of the neighbourhood mothers, often poor herself, and in whose home the child knows he can go for his meals every day. As the months go by, little by little bonds of affection are developed between the child and his "godmother". Some of the mothers watch over the child's health, wash his clothes, or offer him a small present on one of the feast days. All this happens very discreetly and there are many gestures of practical support that we never hear about until long afterwards.

In Senegal, every Muslim family prepares a great feast for the end of Ramadan and it is the custom for all the members of the family to wear their finest clothes and if possible, something new. All the Muslim children in Senegal wait impatiently for this big day! Last November 19th, the day of the feast marking the end of Ramadan, each beggar child, as he left the mosque after morning prayer, was invited to spend the day with his "god-family," sharing in the feast and in the joy of the other children of the neighbourhood. Some of the mothers even managed, with their own money, to offer the child something new to wear. For many of them this was probably the first time in their lives that the feast day was not marked by sadness and comparison with the other children in their fine clothes.

## Literacy classes, practical skills and social activities...

Throughout 2003, the children continued their literacy classes in Wolof, the local language. In addition, they started learning French, which is obligatory in all the schools in Senegal. These classes are essential in order to broaden their minds and to give them the best possible chance for their future. Each class begins with a discussion between the children and their Senegalese teacher on a subject that concerns their daily life: "How to guard against malaria? What is the role of mosquitoes in transmitting this disease?" "The importance of cleanliness in daily life in order to avoid illnesses." "What are the rights of children?"

Three craftsmen from the neighbourhood were approached and asked to introduce three groups of ten children to various manual crafts: joinery, tiling and masonry. From April to September, one afternoon a week was devoted to this activity; some basic material was bought and a small salary paid to the craftsmen.

The aim was not to give the children professional training, but to enable them to discover several skills in practice.

In January 2003, a great feast was prepared for the forty children from the community house. Prepared by a group of neighbourhood mothers, this was a way for the mothers to express their affection to these children who are so far away from their own families.

Recently, the children were able to fulfil a great dream! They formed two football teams, and each player had a real jersey and shorts... in the Senegalese national colours, of course. And a new football was bought, too.

# Letter from Taizé

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